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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [RO](#)
SUBJECT: DIVISIONS IN THE NATIONAL LIBERAL PARTY (PNL) --
HOW LONG WILL PM TARICEANU LAST?

Classified By: Classified By: CDA Rodger Garner for Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: As the National Liberal Party (PNL) faces a decline in the polls, three well-known PNL members have staked out a common position against Prime Minister and PNL leader Calin Popescu-Tariceanu that could form a locus for eventually replacing him. Frustrated by Tariceanu's poor relationship with President Traian Basescu, as well as by what they call his autocratic leadership style and erratic decision-making, the group has called on the PM to return to the party's "core values" or face more intense competition from them and others in the months ahead. Embassy contacts assert it would be premature to write Tariceanu's political obituary, as he maintains strong links with key local leaders who form the spine of the party, as well as with many top PNL members in the Parliament. He has also shown a low tolerance for open dissent. Nonetheless, even many of his supporters have doubts he can survive as PM or PNL leader beyond the short-term. At the very least, the new initiative by the three members may provide a new option for PNL members dissatisfied with Tariceanu's leadership. End Summary.

STOLOJAN, MUSCA, AND STOICA SPEAK OUT

¶2. (C) In a July 17 press conference, three major critics within the center-right PNL joined forces for the first time against the party's president and Prime Minister Calin Popescu Tariceanu. They accused him of turning Romania's historic liberal party into a strictly disciplined, internally undemocratic party that is abandoning the party's values, beholden to certain interest groups, and dropping in the polls. The critics -- former PNL party presidents Theodor Stolojan and Valeriu Stoica and former PNL vice president Mona Musca -- issued a public "appeal" to Tariceanu to fulfill a list of conditions by early September "to avoid a major crisis." The three leaders of what could be an emerging internal opposition to Tariceanu asked him to cancel the recent sanctions given to party several members who criticized him, to return to the "priorities of citizens" rather than those of certain "groups of interests," and to cease the party's fighting with the Democratic Party, it's main partner in the coalition government. Stolojan said that he is working on re-launching PNL's political platform, which many Embassy contacts believe will become an alternative platform that could attract disaffected Liberals and challenge Tariceanu's grip on the party.

¶3. (C) The impetus for the new challenge to Tariceanu by the three senior PNL members was Tariceanu's June 28 proposal for a withdrawal of Romanian troops from Iraq, which took most of the party by surprise. Although the three members did not explicitly cite this cause publicly, they acknowledged their

action was designed to highlight disgust with what they saw as an irresponsible move by Tariceanu in failing to consult international partners, or even others within the PNL, before announcing the proposal. They were also concerned about Tariceanu's attempt to stifle dissent to the proposal -- including from Foreign Minister Ungureanu.

¶4. (C) Musca remains the second most popular politician in Romania after Basescu, according to virtually every opinion poll. Stolojan, credited with more than doubling support for PNL while party president from 2002-2004, has slipped in popularity but is still widely regarded as honest and competent. He has assumed a more public role in recent months, following an extended period of remaining out of the limelight following his September 2004 resignation as PNL leader and PNL-PD presidential candidate. As a presidential counselor to Basescu, he is identified closely with the former. Although widely regarded as a political has-been, Stoica has been prominent in calling for reform within the party, including for a merger between PNL and Basescu's Democratic Party (PD).

TARICEANU'S TIGHT GRIP

¶5. (C) Despite the challenge from the three PNL heavyweights, many PNL contacts confide that any move actually to oust Tariceanu as party leader would be difficult, particularly as long as he remains Prime Minister. They cite the fact that as PM, Tariceanu also controls resources for counties and cities, and hence -- through patronage -- commands allegiance from local party branches. Presidential advisor and PNL member Bogdan Chiritoiu assessed to PolChief that local party leaders have a "clubby and comfortable relationship with Tariceanu" and they "see no

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need to replace him for the time being." At the same time, Chiritoiu did not rule out a shift at some point. He described PNL as "unstintingly mercurial," noting that the party had changed leaders nine times since 1989, far more than any of the other major political parties. Dissident PNL MP Cristian Boureanu similarly mentioned to PolOff the strong regional party support enjoyed by Tariceanu. Boureanu believed it would take an external event, such as snap elections or a motion of no confidence, to provoke a change in the party's leadership. Political Analyst and pollster Sebastian Lazaroiu similarly believed that there would be a shift "only when elections are in sight" and the party sees the need to improve its standing in the polls.

¶6. (C) In addition, PNL members privately assert that Tariceanu controls the PNL central leadership and parliamentary faction to an unprecedented degree. MP and PNL standing bureau member Raluca Turcan complained to poloffs that the PNL was no longer a party of "many independent thinkers" as it had been historically. She claimed that Tariceanu -- with the help of a handful of confidantes such as Chamber of Deputies President Bogdan Olteanu, Minister Delegate and MP Christian David, and academic Dorel Sandor -- secures discipline through threats and tolerates very little dissent from more junior and middle level members. She asserted that ever since Tariceanu had become leader, he had held the reigns very closely and given out positions to ensure personal loyalty, rather than loyalty to party principles. Tariceanu has threatened to kick both Turcan and Boureanu -- who is known as one of the party's most articulate, young politicians -- out of the PNL if they continue to oppose him publicly.

¶7. (C) Ironically, Tariceanu is also strengthened to some degree by the attacks against him by Basescu, as PNL members close ranks to protect their leader. Virtually all contacts report that the two main coalition parties now view each other with far more hostility than they do the opposition Social Democratic Party (PSD). And, as MP Boureanu asserted

to PolChief, "every tirade" against Tariceanu by Basescu makes some PNL members "dig in their heels a little more" to keep Tariceanu in place. In the same vein, many in the party view Stolojan and Musca as too close to Basescu, and hence unsuitable to lead the PNL. PNL MP Cristian Adomnitei referred to them as "puppets," in a conversation with PolOff, adding that he and others in the party are becoming increasingly annoyed with them. Presidential Advisor Chiritoiu opined that the eventual replacement for Tariceanu might have to be a candidate acceptable to both camps, possibly Agriculture Minister Gheorghe Flutur.

ONE KEY PNL DISSIDENT ELABORATES

18. (C) In a July 19 conversation with PolOff, Mona Musca spoke freely about internal fighting within PNL. She asserted the hearts of many in the PNL were never with the DA Alliance, as many PNL leaders were in business -- often as partners with PSD members -- and just wanted to remain a minority party. She claimed that some in the PNL, led by Rompetrol head Dinu Patriciu, sought to help PSD win against Basescu during the second round of the 2004 presidential election. Musca added that Tariceanu also had not wanted to align with Basescu until September 2004, when Stolojan passed the party leadership to him. Musca also recalled her "disgust" with Tariceanu when he recanted on his public pledge to resign and force new election in July 2005. In protest, she resigned from her position as Minister of Culture and Religion and PNL vice president.

19. (C) Musca said Tariceanu's latest episode of "dangerous behavior" -- the undiplomatic way he proposed a withdrawal of Romanian troops from Iraq -- convinced her, Stolojan, and Stoica that Tariceanu had now taken an obsession with fighting Basescu to a dangerous level. She characterized Tariceanu's making the "national interest subservient to politics" as tantamount to "betting his wife in a poker game." She said that she is not worried about being kicked out of the party -- it would be "bizarre" to kick someone out for asking for unity, and doing so would "only damage Tariceanu's ratings," just as he has declined in the polls throughout his fight with Basescu. Worried by PNL's decline to 13% in a recent poll (from a high of roughly 20 percent in 2004), Musca said that she, Stolojan, and Stoica concluded they needed to act to prevent the party from disappearing after governing. She added that Stolojan was currently touring the regional branches to drum up support, but lamented that Tariceanu had already called the mayors ahead of time advising them not to meet with him.

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10. (C) Comment: Regardless of the hold Tariceanu may have on his party, he has been less adept at increasing his own popularity or that of the PNL in opinion polls, even when attempting to capitalize on seemingly popular issues such as a withdrawal of Romanian troops from Iraq. His durability as Prime Minister and PNL leader remains a subject of intense speculation in Bucharest. Some politicians and analysts predict a change mid-fall, after the European Commission gives its final green light to EU accession on January 1, 2007. Others see a cabinet shake-up or new elections in mid-spring 2007. Still others see the PM hanging on for much longer, either due to his political skills or, according to one theory, Basescu's desire to keep him as a foil. The new initiative by Stolojan, Musca, and Stoica may ultimately not be a vehicle that removes Tariceanu from the PM or party leader jobs -- contacts speak more often of new elections or a change in government spurred by a breakdown in the ruling coalition. Nonetheless, it has been the most direct challenge to his party leadership thus far, and presents a new option for PNL members dissatisfied with the course the PM has set.

11. Amembassy Bucharest's reporting telegrams are available

on the Bucharest SIPRNet website:
www.state.sgov.gov/p/eur/bucharest
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